

CASE STUDY 8

CLIMATE MUSEUM UK: PRACTICES IN RESPONSE TO THE TRAUMASPHERE

Bridget McKenzie

Eco-psychologist Zhiwa Woodbury (2019) has proposed that Earth's systems can presently be understood as the Traumasphere. Over centuries, ecocidal activities have created traumatised, toxic localities and a global condition of biosphere trauma. In particular, burning fossil fuels has generated climate trauma, the biggest recent wounding of the biosphere, with worse impacts to come.

Our organisation Climate Museum UK (abbreviated to CMUK) aims to detoxify and regenerate culture by curating and gathering responses to the Earth crisis and designing trauma-sensitive 'activations'. (The term culture is meant in both senses: 'culture' as an expression of social paradigms and 'Culture' as a sector of arts and heritage.)

There are three aspects to CMUK's definition of a museum. Firstly, we are an **experimental museum**, rethinking institutions in an Earth crisis, working with partners to deepen responses and invite cultural audiences to see with 'eco-lenses'. Secondly, we are a **distributed museum**, a network of creative practitioners activating our local communities, helping people to express 'Earth emotions', to explore toxic histories behind the crisis, and to open imaginations to possible futures. A collective that collects, we do not extract and accumulate objects in one place; instead, each individual gathers and releases material that is personally owned by themselves or participants. Thirdly, we are a **digital museum**, creating a 'Possitopia Online', with stories of the impacts of the Earth crisis and the potential for regenerative change.

We play a provocative role in advocating an emergency response to professional communities tackling the challenge of engaging communities with these problematic issues, particularly in our founding role with Culture Declares Emergency,¹ a movement of cultural sector individuals and organisations telling truths, taking action and seeking justice. As network members of the Happy Museum Project,²

we have contributed to its manifesto calling upon museums to be agents of change in response to the multiple crises. We present regularly at a growing number of conferences, journal issues and research initiatives on questions of curating and collecting climate, such as our chapter in the publication, *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* (Harrison & Sterling 2021).

We foreground **activation** as our purpose, distinct from traditional museums that exist to collect and exhibit objects. If all museums can be redefined through practices that we model as imaginative change-makers co-creating a distributed commons, we can help to detoxify the sector while somewhat detoxifying the planet (Figure 1).

As dispersed practitioners with diverse approaches, we are united by core principles, three of which are: aiming to be **Participatory**, involving people democratically; **Intersectional**, acknowledging intersecting factors of injustice; and **Planet-kind**, beyond doing no harm we aim to heal in practical ways.

Our most unique principle is to be **Possitopian** in future thinking. (McKenzie 2020). This expands the cone of possible futures, drawing on geophysical realities while also harnessing the powers of the imagination. We help people imagine future scenarios which are potentially more catastrophic or more abundant than



FIGURE 1 CMUK practitioners in the guise of animal curators, as The Wild Museum. Some ‘activations’ are outdoors helping us reach diverse audiences and linking climate to ecology. Photograph by the author.

they might normally think, weaving these together in reference to real contexts. Our Digital Museum plan is to activate people to create personal lives, communities and ecosystems that are rich with possibility. In a planned platform, our practitioners will showcase their offers and capture stories of resistance, resilience and regenerative change in their places.

Another principle is being **Holistic**. An ongoing collective conversation is how to help participants expand perspectives to see interconnected emergencies and their causes, making visible links between colonialism and extraction; ecological harm and climate breakdown; toxicity and illness; biodiversity loss and zoonotic diseases.

We enable this Holistic principle in a range of ways, for example, by working with partner museums to put an ‘eco lens’ on their collections and to expand perceptions of the Earth crisis. With Tullie House in Carlisle, through staff training and the recruitment of a young artist practitioner, Megan Bowyer, we are exploring links between collecting natural specimens, local histories of material extraction and climate change. As a CMUK associate, Megan has engaged local groups in creative responses to collections of fossils and natural history records, and has contributed her artworks to the Museum’s exhibition ‘Human change, not climate change’.³

Another way to enact our Holistic principle is by designing graphic tools which we use in workshops, toolkits and ‘Print It Yourself displays’. Amy Scaife has commissioned illustrators with Global South perspectives to create posters for her mobile experience, **hubRen**. She rides her cargo tricycle to events around Waltham Forest and unfolds banners and posters to stimulate discussion about planetary boundaries and climate justice. She shares with us what she hears, most frequently a version of these words: *‘I am scared, I am worried about climate change, I don’t know what to do, what can I do?’* (Scaife 2022).

Another example of a graphic tool is ‘Earth Crisis Blinkers’, used in workshops for participants to expand the framings of the crisis (Figure 2). It builds on a diagram by Jan Konietzko (2022) ‘Carbon Tunnel Vision’, adding more detail in three zones: Impacts on Lives; Planetary Boundaries; and Solutions.

A final detoxifying principle is being **Compassionate**, increasing empathy and care for others in the human and more-than-human realms, and developing trauma-sensitive approaches. We carried out a Listening Project for A New Direction in 2021⁴, which showed that people need considerably designed spaces that acknowledge the Earth crisis. In particular, young people are not empowered to speak, contrary to media portrayals of youth as natural eco-warriors. With eco-anxiety layered onto developmental sensitivities, they feel their only recourse is to speak because they are so limited in realms of action, and yet they do not feel educated enough to speak confidently against dominant suppressive discourses.

It is challenging for anyone, of any age or expertise, to grasp the scale and complexity of what is broken. As practitioners, we each hope to be agents for

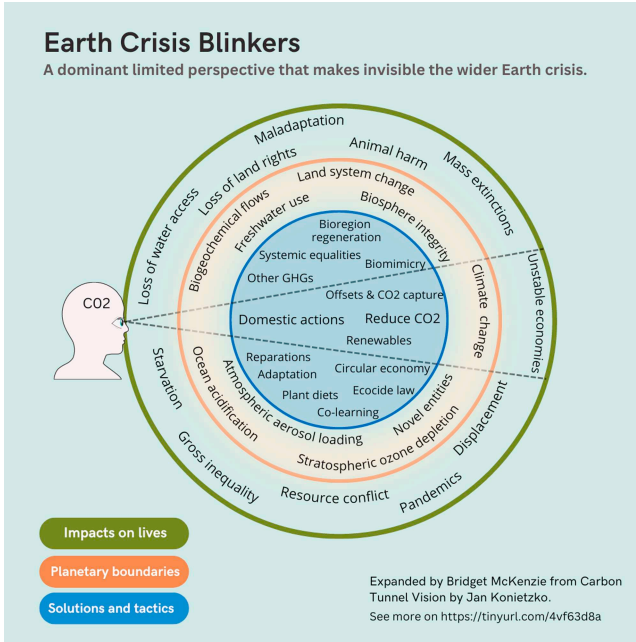


FIGURE 2 Diagram showing the concept of Earth Crisis Blinkers, used in CMUK training.

imaginative expansion, to support people to see systemic harms and the potential of regenerative change. We must balance aiding the expression of feelings with a more transpersonal uncovering of systemic issues. In every public interaction, we experiment in small and varied ways on how to manage this.

Notes

- 1 Culture Declares Emergency <https://www.culturedeclares.org/>
- 2 Happy Museum Manifesto <https://happymuseumproject.org/our-happy-museum-manifesto/>
- 3 Tullie House project ‘Once Upon a Planet’, 2022. <https://www.tulliehouse.co.uk/events/once-upon-planet>
- 4 <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/research/listening-projects>

References

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